



SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG DHOBIS OF ASSAM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Dhobis in Assam is passing through gradual cultural change due to social mobility since independence. The traditional life style of Dhobis has been changing gradually. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the social mobility and cultural change among them. The data were collected on 25th June-3rd July 2023 by administering structured interview schedule to a random sample of Dhobi respondents in Dibrugarh and Duliajan town in upper Assam.

KEYWORDS: Dhobis, Social mobility, Cultural change, Industrialisation, Urbanisation, Assam etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

By and large, Dhobi societies in Assam have remained relatively isolated from the main stream of national life particularly till independence. They are characterized by their aloofness and a lower level of economic activity and a somewhat closed social structure. They maintained long tradition of cohesive social structure and value system. With the increasing tempo of social mobility they are opened up with a fast cultural change particularly in urban areas. Social mobility has become a significant factor of cultural change during the last few decades. It constitutes important parameters of cultural change in the society. Cultural changes among Dhobis of Assam are not uniformly patterned throughout the state. It is observed even among different groups of Dhobis. Under influence of urbanization, industrialization, modernization, globalization and other forces the changes in type of house, possession of domestic goods, worship pattern, decline of traditional values, taboos and customs are discernible. They are losing their traditional culture, and their life style is changing gradually. Standing in-between the tradition and the modernity, they are experiencing the modernity, fast change in their life. However, one can perceive social mobility and the resultant change in cultural life, social behaviour and institutions in a section of the urban Dhobis. A question arises: What kind of interrelationship is perceived between social mobility and cultural change among Dhobis in the urban and industrial areas of Assam, specially the towns in Upper Assam?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Subhadra Mitra Channa (1999) supports the agglomeration thesis on the origin of caste system as put forward by Karve (1961) and supported by Berreman, Habib and others by using data of Dhobis (washermen) of Delhi. She found that social and ritual practices of Dhobis are different from higher castes. She adds that lifestyle of Dhobis has changed due to sanskritization and westernisation. She also observes that they adopt higher caste Hindu traits like observing fast, going on pilgrimage etc. Ponna Wignaraja (1993) deals with human development and participatory democracy as core values of the contemporary social mobilization, it is grass roots subaltern marginalized communities as the social bases. All these communities got their own historical, socio-economic, political, cultural specificities, which are manifest in mobilization and for the paradigm shift in the developmental strategy and participatory democracy. Omvedt (1994) claims to understand the lower caste movements in a more creative than the official orthodox communists. In this work the author analyses the three trends, which were represented by Congress and Gandhi against the colonial rule, the Communists anti-feudal and Ambedkar against the caste system in the country. In her view Ambedkar's path of liberation of the lower castes is overthrowing of the Hindu religious ideological hegemony. Ambedkar tended to see economic and social oppression as separate structures, taking up cultural change as the way to challenge Hinduism and socialism as the way to overcome economic exploitation. Kancha Ilaiah (1996) argues that there is a contradiction between two cultures. One is the productive culture of the *dalitbahujans* and unproductive culture of the Brahmins. The former is

responsible for the entire material wealth, whereas the later exploiting the *dalitbahujans* with the device of the *Brahminical* ideology by using Sanskrit language, which cannot be understood by the producing castes. He critically assessed the state, market and relations in civil society and the emergence of the upper caste *shudras* as the ruling class, their ideology and process of action to legitimize.

Thus, these studies reveal that (i) social and ritual practices of Dhobis are different from higher caste, sanskritisation, westernisation and modernisation have brought significant changes in their life style. (ii) human development and participatory democracy as core values of the contemporary social mobilization. (iii) cultural change as the way to challenge Hinduism and socialism to overcome economic exploitation. (iv) the productive culture is responsible for the entire material wealth, whereas the unproductive culture is responsible for the exploiting the *dalitbahujans* with the device of the *Brahminical* ideology are brought cultural change among them.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To understand the interrelationship of social mobility and Cultural change among Dhobis.

4. THE METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a random sample of 428 Dhobis in Dibrugarh and Duliajan towns by structured interview schedule. 30% adult Dhobis has been taken from the universe (1397) by stratified sampling method of the Dhobi communities in the two towns. First, the universe was divided equally into three age groups (18-35, 36-59 and 60 & above) and then males and females were selected equally by random sampling method. The study has analysed the empirical data in a comparative perspective of the two Dhobi communities in the two towns.

5. SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Dhobis have their own unique social and cultural life. An attempt has been made in the paper to examine role of social mobility in their social and cultural life with reference to change in their housing types, possession of gadgets/amenities and variation in offering of Prayer to God that have occurred in certain aspects of their social and cultural life over the three generations among them. The kind of structure of house indicates the mobility of the individual and family and also determines individual's economic and social status. Poor housing facilities will lead to ill health and good housing facility lead to upward social mobility. Hence in our study, type of house has been used as an indicator of social mobility. In the present study, four types of houses are classified. RCC, Assam type pacca, Assam type semi-pacca and Assam type kachcha. It is analysed in the following table:

Table 1.1
Type of Houses over Three Generations among the Dhobis in Duliajan and Dibrugarh Towns
(Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of House	No. of Dhobis												Total		
	Duliajan Town						Dibrugarh Town								
	Hindi Speaking Dhobis			Bengali Dhobis			Hindi Speaking Dhobis			Bengali Dhobis					
Respon dent	Father	Grand Father	Respon dent	Father	Grand Father	Respon dent	Father	Grand Father	Respon dent	Father	Grand Father	Respon dent	Father	Grand Father	
RCC	--	--	3 (4.54)	6 (12)	--	--	44 (15.60)	--	--	5 (16.66)	1 (3.33)	--	55 (12.85)	1 (0.23)	3 (0.7)
Assam Type pacca	34 (51.51)	6 (9.09)	6 (9.09)	16 (32)	9 (18)	--	51 (18.08)	6 (2.12)	--	12 (40)	8 (26.66)	--	113 (26.40)	29 (6.77)	6 (1.40)
Assam Type Semi Pacca	--	--	--	9 (18)	12 (24)	3 (6)	81 (28.72)	65 (23.04)	57 (20.21)	3 (10)	7 (23.33)	2 (6.66)	93 (21.72)	84 (19.62)	62 (14.48)
Assam Type Kachcha	32 (48.48)	60 (90.90)	57 (86.36)	19 (38)	29 (58)	47 (94)	106 (37.58)	211 (74.82)	225 (79.78)	10 (33.33)	14 (46.66)	28 (93.33)	167 (39.01)	314 (73.36)	357 (83.41)
Total	66 (100)	66 (100)	66 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	282 (100)	282 (100)	282 (100)	30 (100)	30 (100)	30 (100)	428 (100)	428 (100)	428 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during 25th June-3rd July 2023

The table shows that the number of Assam type pacca houses has been increasing from grand father's generation (1.40%) to the respondents' generation (26.4%) while the number of Assam type kachcha houses has been decreasing from grand father's generation (83.41%) to the respondents' generation (39.01 %). Similarly, Assam type semi-pacca and RCC houses have also been increasing in the respective generations. Thus, majority of the respondents live in the Assam type kachcha, Assam type pacca and Assam type semi-pacca houses than their past generations. It is also observed that Assam type semi-pacca and RCC houses has been increasing more among the Bengali Dhobis than the Hindi speaking Dhobis. This is due to upward intergenerational occupational mobility among them.

Possessions of household gadgets/ amenities among Dhobis indicate a level of material life of Dhobis. It has been changing over the three generations. It is observed in respect of possession of electricity connection, modern furniture, bike/scooter, car/four wheeler, fridge/inverter, bank account, personal insurance and bank loan. Variations in possession of gadgets/amenities over the three generations are shown in the following table:

Table 1.2
Variation in Possession of Gadgets/Amenities over Three Generations among the Dhobis in Duliujan and Dibrugarh Towns (Percentage in Parentheses)

Gadgets/ Amenities	No. of Dhobis												Total
	Dulujan Town				Dibrugarh Town								
	Hindi Speaking Dhobis		Bengali Dhobis		Hindi Speaking Dhobis		Bengali Dhobis						
	Respondent N=66	Father N=66	Respondent N=50	Father N=50	Respondent N=282	Father N=282	Respondent N=30	Father N=30	Respondent N=428	Father N=428			
Electricity Connection	66 (100)	75 (50.75)	44 (88)	31 (62)	256 (90.78)	83 (29.43)	30 (100)	18 (60)	396 (92.52)	182 (42.52)			
Modern Furniture	22 (33.33)	--	28 (56)	12 (24)	89 (31.56)	--	26 (86.66)	7 (23.33)	165 (38.55)	19 (4.43)			
Bike/ Scooter	28 (42.42)	--	9 (18)	--	71 (25.17)	--	5 (16.66)	--	113 (26.40)	--			
Car/Four wheeler	6 (9.09)	--	6 (12)	--	6 (2.12)	--	3 (10)	--	21 (4.90)	--			
Fridge /Inverter	37 (56.06)	--	22 (44)	--	83 (29.43)	--	13 (43.33)	--	155 (36.21)	--			
Bank Account	66 (100)	3 (4.54)	37 (74)	9 (18)	278 (64.95)	44 (15.60)	28 (93.33)	7 (23.33)	409 (95.56)	63 (14.71)			
Personal Insurance	43 (65.15)	--	35 (70)	3 (6)	153 (54.25)	--	24 (80)	6 (66.66)	255 (59.57)	5 (1.16)			
Bank Loan	6 (9.09)	--	6 (12)	--	6 (2.12)	--	2 (6.66)	1 (3.33)	21 (4.90)	1 (0.23)			

Source: Field Study Conducted during 25th June-3rd July 2023

It is observed that (42.52%) had electricity connection, followed by modern furniture-(4.43%), bank account (14.71%), personal insurance (1.16%) and bank loan (0.23%) in the father's generation while 92.52% possessed electricity connection followed by modern furniture (38.55%), bike/ scooter (26.40%), car/four wheeler (4.90%), fridge/inverter(36.21%),bank account(95.56%), personal insurance (59.57%) and bank loan (4.90%) in the respondents generation. The grandfather's generation did not have these gadgets and amenities. Comparatively, It is also found that Bengali Dhobis posses more gadgets and amenities than Hindi speaking Dhobis due to upward inter-generational occupational mobility among them.

As social mobility leads to cultural changes among Dhobis, certain questions were asked to the respondents' prayer to God. The following four types of answers are collected from respondents about variation in prayer offered or not offered to god over the generations namely: prayer offered daily, not daily but frequently, occasionally and offered never. These are shown in the following table:

Table 1.3
Variation in offering of Prayer to God (Worship) over the Three Generations among the Dhobis in Duliujan and Dibrugarh Towns (Percentage in Parentheses)

Dhobis pray God/ Worship	No. of Dhobis												Total		
	Dulijan Town						Dibrugarh Town								
	Hindi Speaking Dhobis			Bengali Dhobis			Hindi Speaking Dhobis			Bengali Dhobis					
	Respondent	Father	Grand Father	Respondent	Father	Grand Father	Respondent	Father	Grand Father	Respondent	Father	Grand Father	Respondent	Father	Grand Father
Daily	40 (60.60)	47 (71.21)	53 (80.30)	40 (80)	43 (86)	46 (92)	128 (45.39)	188 (66.66)	227 (80.49)	23 (76.66)	26 (86.66)	28 (93.33)	231 (53.97)	304 (71.02)	354 (82.71)
Frequently	22 (33.33)	16 (24.24)	11 (16.66)	9 (18)	6 (12)	4 (8)	102 (36.17)	68 (24.11)	45 (15.95)	4 (13.33)	3 (10)	2 (6.66)	137 (32)	93 (21.72)	82 (14.48)
Occasionally	4 (6.06)	3 (4.54)	2 (3.03)	1 (2)	1 (2)	--	46 (16.31)	24 (8.51)	8 (2.83)	2 (6.66)	1 (3.33)	--	53 (12.38)	29 (6.77)	10 (2.33)
Never	--	--	--	--	--	--	6 (2.12)	2 (0.70)	2 (0.70)	1 (3.33)	--	--	7 (1.63)	2 (0.46)	2 (0.46)
Total	66 (100)	66 (100)	66 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	282 (100)	282 (100)	282 (100)	30 (100)	30 (100)	30 (100)	428 (100)	428 (100)	428 (100)

Source: Field Study Conducted during 25th June-3rd July 2023

The table reveals that daily offering of prayer to God/worship has been decreasing from grand fathers' generation (82.71%) to the respondents' generation (53.97%). On the other hand, frequent worshippers have been increasing grand fathers' generation (14.48%) to the respondents' generation (32%). Similarly, occasional worshippers have been increasing from grand fathers' generation (2.33%) to respondents' generation (12.38%). It is also

observed that those who never offer prayer or worship have been increasing from the grandfather's generation to the respondents' generation. Thus, daily worshippers have been decreasing and frequent and occasional worshippers are increasing over the three generations. Comparatively, mobility towards conservatism religious outlook found more among the Hindi speaking Dhobis than Bengali Dhobis over three generations due to upward intergenerational educational mobility among them.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. It is found that majority of the Dhobis live in the Assam type kachcha, Assam type pacca and Assam type semi-pacca houses than their past generations. It is also added that Assam type semi-pacca and RCC houses has been increasing more among the Bengali Dhobis than the Hindi speaking Dhobis. This is due to upward intergenerational occupational mobility among them.
2. It is found that Possessions of household gadgets/ amenities have been increasing than their previous generations. It is also observed that Bengali Dhobis posses more of household gadgets/ amenities than Hindi Speaking Dhobis due to upward intergenerational occupational mobility among them.
3. It is found that daily worshippers have been decreasing and frequent and occasional worshippers have been increasing over three generations. The study also reveals that change towards conservatism religious outlook is found more among Hindi speaking Dhobis than Bengali Dhobis due to upward intergenerational educational mobility among them.

7. CONCLUSION

There is limited literature which throws light on the past and present conditions of Dhobis of Assam, whatever studies have been made on Dhobis, are mostly confined to meagre description of other aspects without taking into consideration of the changes and mobility that are happening among them. The present study aims at filling up this gap to some extent. In this paper, an attempt is made to analyse social mobility and cultural change among them. The researcher has attempted to find out the changes in the types of houses, Possession of gadgets/amenities, religious practices over three generations among Dhobis due to social mobility. The study reveals that upward intergenerational occupational mobility brings change their housing pattern and increase household gadgets and amenities among them. It is found more among Bengali Dhobis than Hindi speaking Dhobis. While upward intergenerational educational mobility brings change towards conservatism religious outlook among them and it is found more among Hindi speaking Dhobis than Bengali Dhobis. Thus, social mobility helps them to assimilate in to the mainstream of the society.

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